

How the best ideas are born

Are you one of those people who come up with great ideas on the go? Who have dozens of ideas up their sleeve, ready to be shared with the world and turned into unicorns? No? Then maybe this article will you get closer to becoming an idea generation mastermind.

Idea generation is oftentimes surrounded with mystique. I am sure that you have heard about — or even experienced — a ‘Eureka moment’. A sudden sense of clarity, like a solution sent from heaven. Philosophers talk about it. Authors and poets write about it. They call it “genius”, “moment of God’s creativity”, “muse”. Nietzsche describes it best:

‘The notion of revelation describes the condition quite simply; by which I mean that something profoundly convulsive and disturbing suddenly becomes visible and audible with indescribable definiteness and exactness.’

Smart thinking rather than divine insight

The reality is, unfortunately, not very exotic. A good idea (the vast majority of good ideas) follows a pattern, a four stage creative thought process:

1. Preparation phase - a phase where you gather all the information you need to create that idea of yours. Your preparation phase started the day you were born
2. Incubation phase - the 'brainstorming' for this particular idea
3. Illumination phase - the 'aha! moment'
4. Verification phase - a phase where you analyse and establish whether to move forward with this idea or not.

The illumination, the 'Eureka', occurs when preparation and incubation phases get to meet. An idea needs to make its way through the entire process to be worth your time, money and effort. If you are genuinely interested in idea generation, then you need to put a solid effort into your preparation phase.

The more you feed your brain with high quality content, the better ideas you'll create throughout your career.

You can optimise your idea generation

There are some ways to enhance your 'aha! moment'. The first rule for coming up with brilliant ideas is to recognise the setting in which your ideas thrive. Science talks about the '5 Bs' of idea generation:

1. Bed - just before falling asleep or the moment you wake up
2. Bathroom - it's not a coincidence that a lot of people come up with their best ideas in the bathtub or on the toilet
3. Beach - as in 'vacation'. Any vacation will do
4. Bus - as in 'transportation, moving from a to 'B" (*unintentional joke here!*)
5. Badminton - as in 'physical activity'. Tennis works just fine, as does any other sport.

Recently, I did a survey among my followers and students, where I asked them about their optimal setting for idea generation and creative business thinking

and surprisingly many gave me the 6th B:

6. Beats – as in listening to music.

“Your best ideas, those eureka moments that turn the world upside down, seldom come when you’re juggling emails, rushing to meet the 5 P.M. deadline or straining to make your voice heard in a high-stress meeting. They come when you’re walking the dog, soaking in the bath or swinging in a hammock.” – Carl Honore

What do all those settings have in common? During all of them your brain goes into relax mode (even if you are not feeling very relaxed playing a ‘life or dead’ game of badminton or if the vacation turned out to be anything but calm) — where you give yourself the space and time for processing insights from the previous stages of idea generation. Oftentimes you are not even aware of the fact that your brain is doing the work for you in the background. It’s actually enough to get you into a different environment compared to the one of the incubation phase (brainstorming at the office?) to get your illumination juices flowing.

Perhaps you are one of those people who brings a notebook with them on a walk? Or who always finds solutions while driving? Or who, to be completely honest, could justify half an hour sitting on the toilet (*ok, make it a lovely bubble bath, you get the point!*). The important thing here is for you to find your ‘Bs’. I discovered my ‘Bs’ years ago, so if you find me driving for the sake of driving, it means that I’m probably onto something big. I also have my daily dog walks on the beach; not sure who needs them the most, my rescue doberman or me! Speaking of which, my idea generation skills improved tenfold since I adopted my dog.

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There needs to be a need

Ideas need to begin somewhere. They require an issue to solve or a desire to change the world. Something that is not working, or something that just doesn't exist yet. There needs to be a need for this new idea, and you need to be the one to come up with it.

Although there are many theories on where to look for your next idea, Gary Vaynerchuk explains it best:

“The best idea is scratching your own itch”

A lot of the best ideas you'll see on the market are just as unsexy and unexotic as the steps of the idea generation process. Most likely, they are not a result of a Eureka moment, but rather practical and pragmatic test based solutions to something that is simply not working. A brilliant idea doesn't have to be born out of a long incubation and the ambitious reinvention of the wheel. Sometimes the devil is in the details and one tiny detail could be the difference between something ordinary and something that sky rockets.

Do not overestimate the importance of Eureka - it's not the only way to innovate...

“The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not ‘Eureka!’ but ‘That’s funny...’” – Isaac Asimov

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Interested in learning the basics of idea generation? Check out Magdalena's course "Idea Lab: Idea generation for beginners". Maddyneess readers can get 30% discount by entering "Maddyneess" at the checkout.

Idea Generation for beginners

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